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SUBJECT: BLOCHER-ROSCHACHER ROILS SWISS CONSENSUS POLITICS

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Blocher-Roschacher affair is for the most part about Federal Councilor (and Justice Minister) Blocher's role in the July 2006 resignation of Federal Prosecutor Valentin Roschacher. The key question hanging in the air is whether Blocher abused his office as Justice Minister to exert undue pressure on Roschacher to resign, or worse, was involved in a secret plot trying to oust Roschacher. Though this complex saga appears far from over, it thus far has generated one of the worst bouts of bickering and public accusations in modern Swiss politics. However, barring some further sensational development, we should not expect Blocher to resign or be removed from office. The most likely effect of the affair will be to galvanize already committed supporters in the Swiss political camps, rather than increase the support for one party or another. End summary.

Background: The "Ramos Affair"

¶2. (U) In July 2006, former Federal Prosecutor Valentin Roschacher announced his resignation. He previously had weathered some domestic criticism in 2004 for alleged mismanagement and for a terrorism cooperation agreement he concluded with the USG. However, his 2006 resignation was made amidst mounting public pressure following a Swiss newspaper article alleging that Roschacher had played an instrumental role in engaging a convicted Columbian drug trafficker, Jose Manuel Ramos, for an undercover operation in Switzerland. Ramos reportedly had spent 12 years in a U.S. prison on drug charges.

¶3. (U) Information provided by Ramos purportedly prompted an investigation against a Swiss private banker, Oskar Holenweger, on suspicion of money-laundering. The investigation ultimately led to Holenweger's personal ruin, but to no formal indictment. Swiss press reports claimed that the Federal Prosecutor had placed too much stock in information provided by an ex-con. Only days after the press reports, Justice Minister Blocher and the Swiss Federal Criminal Court in Bellinzona, which hold joint oversight over the Federal Prosecutor's office, announced a special investigation of Roschacher's office. Roschacher announced his resignation before the end of this special investigation, though he ultimately was cleared of the allegations of mismanagement and legal wrongdoing.

The "Blocher-Roschacher Affair"

¶4. (U) The Oversight Committee of Parliament's lower house (GPK-N), which monitors the Swiss government administration on behalf of the Parliament, has had an ongoing investigation of the circumstances

leading to Roschacher's resignation. The issue had remained largely out of the public discussion until September 3, when left-leaning newspapers began reporting information apparently leaked from a GPK-N report on Roschacher's resignation. According to those press reports, Blocher allegedly plotted to oust Roschacher, overstepping his mandate by pressuring Roschacher to resign and by arranging a severance package for Roschacher to help convince him to quit absent any legal or administrative basis.

15. (U) The storm broke on September 5 when the Federal Council announced it planned to engage an independent legal expert in order to help it assess the findings of the (yet-to-be published) GPK-N report on Roschacher's resignation. Under mounting pressure of the media reports, Blocher the same day held a press conference denouncing the GPK-N report as "tendentious" and the allegation of a plot as "nonsense."

16. (U) Later on September 5, the GPK-N held a hastily arranged press conference to publish the findings of its report, which alleges serious misconduct of Blocher, including bypassing the Federal Council and disregarding the separation of powers in the "non-voluntary resignation" of Roschacher. More ominously, the GPK-N also announced that it was going to examine documents that might reveal a plot to oust Roschacher, cooked up by Holenweger and supposedly involving Blocher. The documents reportedly had been obtained by the German police and provided by the government of Germany to Swiss legal officials. By September 6, the media from left to right was pitching the imbroglio as an affair of state focusing almost exclusively on putative evidence of a plot. The actual GPK-N report got almost overlooked by the media.

The SVP Comes Out Swinging

17. (U) On September 6, Blocher's SVP fought back. SVP strategist Christoph Moergeli presented the press with what he said were the original documents that the GPK-N wanted to evaluate for indications of the alleged plot. Thus far, the GPK-N has only viewed copies held by a Swiss Examining Magistrate, who did not permit the GPK-N to make copies of the documents. Moergeli said he had obtained the documents directly from his "friend" Holenweger. The documents are a series of military-style flipcharts with names of two dozen Swiss politicians, journalists, and private persons, annotated with comments, abbreviations, and markings. Moergeli vehemently dismissed allegations that the documents in question represented plans of a secret plot against Roschacher, calling the conspiracy theory "politically instrumentalized bull---." He argued that the cryptic notes of Holenweger, a former Swiss army general staff officer, were simply Holenweger's effort to record the crisis unfolding over Roschacher following the publication of the press reports regarding the "Ramos Affair."

18. (U) In a September 11 statement released via his lawyer, Holenweger himself reinforced Moergli's claims, arguing that the documents were simply notes he wrote for his own "personal orientation," and that none of the persons listed were aware of the documents or involved in any kind of plot. He further stated that he had not met with Blocher since 1988, and apologized for the trouble the documents had caused.

"UnSwiss" Bickering

19. (SBU) Though this complex saga appears far from over, it thus far has generated one of the worst bouts of bickering and public accusations in modern Swiss politics. The SVP has presented recent events as proof of its claims that the left was conspiring to oust Blocher from the Federal Council which comes up for election in December. Lucrezia Meier-Schatz, the member of the GPK-N who insinuated a possible plot to oust Roschacher, reportedly has received anonymous threats and has been put under police protection. Some members of the (center-)left have decried Blocher's position on the Federal Council as untenable, though generally denying any plot to remove him. Federal Councilor and Interior Minister Couchepin (FDP) said on Swiss radio that recent events reminded him of fascism in Italy and, referring to his arch-enemy Blocher, that

Switzerland had no need for a "Duce."

¶10. (SBU) On September 10, Swiss President Micheline Calmy-Rey, who thus far had refrained from comment, urged restraint on everybody. In an interview with Switzerland's largest circulation tabloid, Calmy-Rey called the current bickering among the political parties "unSwiss" and admonished that nobody should be blamed before all the facts are known and carefully evaluated.

A Complicated Storyline

¶11. (SBU) The circumstances leading to Roschacher's resignation remain murky and facts are scant. However, it is an open secret that there was no love lost between Blocher and Roschacher, who repeatedly had clashed publicly prior to Roschacher's July 2006 resignation. It also is a fact that Blocher had warned Roschacher in writing of his possible dismissal. Nevertheless, Blocher would have had no authority to single-handedly sack Roschacher. That is where the conspiracy theories start, allegedly "corroborated" by the Holenweger charts, claiming that the press report that prompted Roschacher's resignation was part of a bigger plot (Comment: The newspaper in question -- "Weltwoche" -- firmly toes the SVP line. End comment)

¶12. (SBU) Those who claim that the affair stems from a personal vendetta against Blocher note that Roschacher had been nominated as Federal Prosecutor by Blocher's predecessor as Justice Minister, Ruth Metzler (CVP), whom Blocher bumped from the Federal Council following the elections in 2003, ending 44-years of stable party composition of the Swiss government when the SVP demanded a second seat in the Cabinet. Roschacher had a long-standing personal relationship dating back to student days with Metzler and her husband, so his relations with Blocher likely were strained from the very beginning. Meier-Schatz, who led the investigation of Blocher's actions and stirred rumors of a plot, is a member of the Christian-Democratic party, as is Metzler, and represents a Canton in eastern Switzerland from which both Roschacher and Metzler hail.

Comment: Pre-Election Politics?

¶13. (SBU) The Blocher-Roschacher affair has roiled the Swiss political scene whose normal hallmarks are consensus and compromise. And it comes at a particularly sensitive time, as the Swiss prepare for their October 21 parliamentary elections. General Swiss prosperity and challenges related to globalization appear to be reinforcing the normal pre-election tendency toward "niche" politics and polarization (more on that will be reported septel).

¶14. (SBU) Against this backdrop, the vehemence with which the various parties have asserted wrong-doing by others and/or claimed for themselves the status of "victim" surely is driven by a desire to score political points. However, barring some further sensational development, we should not expect Blocher to resign or be removed from office. Give the complexity of the storyline and limited public appetite for political news, the most likely effect of the affair will be to galvanize already committed supporters in the Swiss political camps, rather than increase the support for one party or another.

CARTER